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# The changing nature of school principals' work: Lessons and future directions for school leadership research

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# The Changing Nature of School Principals' Work: Lessons and Future Directions for School Leadership Research

**Moosung Lee**

## Introduction

Recent research has charted the changing landscape in the work of principals and headteachers (hereafter referred to as 'principals') in Western contexts (e.g. Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach 2003; Pollock, Wang & Hauseman 2014). In line with the emerging research, this Special Issue documents changes occurring in principals' daily work in Alabama, the U.S. (by Sun, Johnson & Przybylski), in Ontario, Canada (by Pollock) and in Victoria, Australia (by Drysdale, Gurr & Goode). The Special Issue also illuminates that the changing nature of principals' work emerges beyond Western societies, with articles concerning Hong Kong (by Cheng & Szeto), Nepal (by Shigh & Allison) and the Philippines (by Buenviaje). The six articles comprising this Special Issue provide a solid contribution to the emerging research on the changing nature of school principals' work in various countries and jurisdictions. In particular, including relatively uncharted countries such as Nepal and the Philippines further helps the Special Issue to gain scholarly attention and traction. In this commentary article, I have attempted to extract a number of important lessons for international research communities focusing on the work of school principals. I have also sought to capture a fuller picture of the changing nature of principals' work by comparing, complementing and combining key findings across the six articles, which I hope will be useful for ongoing discussions and future directions in the research area.

## **Lesson 1: There exist similar factors that shape the changing nature of school principals' work across different schooling systems.**

While studies in the Special Issue have been conducted in different education systems, they report some similar factors that influence the changing nature of principals' work, namely:

- increasingly diverse student populations
- growing importance of resources embedded in local communities,
- a high accountability policy environment.

I outline each of the factors below in a little more detail.

### ***Increasingly Diverse Student Populations***

Cheng and Szeto's study reports the ever-changing student demographics in terms of increasing ethnic diversity and decreasing birth rates as a main factor shaping principals' work in Hong Kong. Similarly, Pollock's study demonstrates that an increasingly diverse student population in terms of race and ethnicity (and thereby culture and religion) and declining student enrolment are key school environments in conjunction with the changing nature of principals' work in Ontario.

### ***Growing Importance of Resources Embedded in Local Communities***

Given the lack of school resources penetrating into the whole public school system in Nepal, Singh and Allison indicate the importance of principals' building collegial relationships with local communities to garner community support and resources for school management. Even in schools situated in relatively developed societies, principals find themselves seeking out additional resources from local communities, including local universities, in order to 1) address wellbeing issues of students and teachers in Ontario (Pollock); 2) build a school structurally and culturally for students with multiple disabilities in Victoria (Drysdale et al.); and 3) provide tailored support for special education students and non-Chinese speaking students in Hong Kong (Cheng & Szeto).

### ***A High Accountability Policy Environment***

Two articles in the Special Issue add evidence to the trend that principals' focus on and allocation of their time to their leadership responsibilities have substantially shifted to externally imposed accountability measures in East Asia and Anglo-Saxon countries (see also Lee & Kirby 2016). Cheng and Szeto note that externally imposed accountability measures such as the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) change principals' priorities over their leadership behaviours in line with accountability requirements. In a similar vein, Sun et al. situate school leadership practices in another externally imposed accountability measure – the Alabama 2020 accountability policy – which leads principals in the US state into data-driven school leadership (DDSL) practices.

These three factors are similarly identified across some of the articles in the Special Issue. Furthermore, they appear as interrelated elements that shape the nature of principals' work across these contexts.

## **Lesson 2: There are noticeable differences in principals' work between developing and developed countries, suggesting that broader societal or national contexts are important in the changing nature of principals' work.**

Differences or variations in school leadership practices within a country or jurisdiction are largely attributed to individual principals' characteristics and the organisational contexts of schools. However, it is reasonable to say that marked differences in principals' practices identified from different countries or jurisdictions can be indicative of how broader societal or national contexts play a role in changing the nature of principals' work (see also Lee & Hallinger 2012).

Consistent with previous studies (e.g. Arikewuyo 2008; Hallinger & Lee 2013, 2014; Lee 2006), Singh and Allison's article demonstrates that one of the most critical issues commonly facing principals in developing countries is the serious dearth of school (financial) resources and basic school infrastructure. Principals are keenly aware of the implications of this and the impacts on leading and managing schools. Apart from the issue of limited school resources and infrastructure in developing countries, Pollock's study sheds light on a different nature of principals' work that may

be rarely found in developing countries, namely, student discipline issues related to cyberbullying. She finds that addressing cyberbullying not only adds extra workload, but also reshapes the nature of principals' work in creating safe school environments, given the non-traditional characteristics of cyberbullying (including privacy issues, and the facts that it occurs beyond school boundaries and is complicated by technological issues). Pollock also documents that information and communication technology (ICT) changes the nature of principals' work, particularly communication work. In particular, she believes that ICT (e.g. email and social media) has some positive features for efficient organisational communication, but she also suggests that it appears to blur the line between work and home for principals in Ontario. This is an important point in that it suggests that existing research on principals' time use and allocation should pay greater attention to principals' work outside of school and before/after school, which is mediated through ICT.

### **Lesson 3: While successful school principals engage in a similar set of practices across different schooling systems, their vision, personal philosophy, courage and/or passion are the key drivers in enacting and sustaining the aforementioned core practices.**

Across the six articles, it is found that successful or effective school principals actively engage in a similar, core set of practices such as leading instructional programmes and managing staff and resources. Importantly, two articles (by Buenviaje and by Drysdale et al.) illuminate how school principals' personal philosophy, values (Drysdale et al.) and/or passion (Buenviaje) are the key drivers in enacting and sustaining such core practices. Buenviaje's study, with a focus on school principals' work passion, shows that principals' passion about their work not only makes principals maintain a high level of work intensity, but also makes their work meaningful in their eyes. This resonates with Drysdale et al.'s discussion of principals' vision (i.e. the belief in what can be done, providing energy and purpose), personal philosophy based on meaningful values, and courage (i.e. the determination to change). More importantly, Drysdale et al. convincingly argue that the aforementioned characteristics of school principals are the sources for them to explore the outer limits of their roles towards what they term 'augmented' and 'potential' roles.

### **Lesson 4: Research foci on school leadership practices from non-Western perspectives or frameworks can complement and consolidate contemporary leadership research dominated by work from Anglo-American contexts.**

Buenviaje's study, conducted in a provincial area in the Philippines, pays attention to particular spatial and temporal dimensions of Filipino principals' lives – their time before/after school and outside of school – which have been largely uncharted by previous research literature on principal leadership. His study reports that principals' allocation of time to relaxing, reflecting on daily school work, and engaging in charitable work at religious or community organisations before or after school, and outside of school, is an integral part of their lives. According to Buenviaje, such activities (what he calls 'therapeutic activities') are sources of passion that keep school principals working hard, despite various leadership challenges. Buenviaje's focus on school principals' daily life before/after school, and outside of school, suggests another way to research principals' use or allocation of time, which can complement a growing number of empirical studies mainly conducted in Western societies. Notably, existing studies tend to focus only on principals' time use/allocation in several core domains of leadership practices within school boundaries, such as administration,



external relations (with parents/the community), internal relations (with teachers and students) and instructional leadership (Lee 2016). The missing link here is the possible impact of principals' personal time spent before/after and outside of school on school improvement.

In addition, exploring principals' daily life outside of normal school hours may provide implications for research on principals' professional development. As noted in Buenviaje's article, Western leadership development frameworks tend to focus more on what school principals' roles and responsibilities ought to be, rather than how and why they should be. If we accept this statement, it would be necessary to research how and why principals' spiritual and psychological well-being, as highlighted by the article, should be integrated into contemporary leadership development frameworks/programmes used across economically developed societies (for details of successful leadership development programmes, see Walker, Bryant & Lee 2013). In fact, this line of research may help researchers and policy-makers to address the growing concerns for principals' (potential) burnout and work intensity issues reported in Hong Kong (Cheng & Szeto) and Ontario (Pollock) in this Special Issue.

## Suggestions for Future Work

It has been a pleasure to discuss the key findings of the articles in the Special Issue – they make a significant contribution to the emerging field of research on principals' work. I wish to provide some suggestions for future work in the hope that they could further consolidate the contribution of the Special Issue to the field.

First, the six articles shed light on the changing nature of principals' work by scrutinising 1) different contexts within which school principals work, and 2) how their work is influenced by those contexts. At the same time, research on how principals influence the changing contexts is relatively thin on the ground. As noted, one of the lessons from the Special Issue is that principals' work is continuously expanding within school contexts (Cheng & Szeto) and outside of school (Buenviaje; Pollock), and is getting more complicated – requiring the use of ICT and attention to cyberbullying (Pollock), and demanding data-based decision-making and data-driven leadership (Sun et al.). Principals are sensitive to the ever-expanding and complicated contexts to which they seem, in general, to be reactive or responsive. Nonetheless, we know that some principals are also proactive and somehow entrepreneurial in influencing the contexts in the midst of forming their responses. I think that Drysdale, Gurr and Goode's study gives us an important piece of the picture about how this can be possible through principals who dare to make a difference. More studies in this line are needed.

Second, more studies with non-Western perspectives (particularly from South Asia, South America and Africa) are much needed. For example, I look forward to more case studies similar to Buenviaje's study in the Philippines, but on a larger scale with multi-site investigations and multiple methods. I also appreciate Singh and Allison's study in Kathmandu, which is highly informative, given that only a few articles are available about Nepalese principals' leadership practices in international outlets. Their study uses a conceptual lens, which is based on a common set of effective leadership dimensions from the existing Western school leadership literature (e.g. Council of Chief State School Officers 2008; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Cohen 2007; Day et al. 2010; Leithwood 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi 2005; Louis et al. 2010; The Wallace Foundation 2013). On the one hand, this approach enables researchers to capture effective leadership practices systematically in a less charted context. On the other hand, this pre-occupied lens developed from the Anglo-American literature in particular may have not charted some effective leadership practices from

a local or indigenous perspective. This is because some effective leadership practices commonly defined in the Western research literature might be differently perceived or interpreted in Nepalese school contexts. For example, effective instructional leadership practices such as principals' direct supervision of teachers' instruction exercised in the U.S. are largely unacceptable to cultural contexts such as East Asia (Lee, Walker & Chui 2012). In this regard, although there would be a trade-off, I think that using a grounded-theory approach probably would have generated more context-specific findings about Nepalese principals' leadership practice for this study.

Third, of a number of important findings in the study of Pollock, I pay special attention to two findings for future research in the field. One concerns principals' focus on teachers' health and students' wellbeing. If the effectiveness of principals' practices is captured only by academic outcomes of schools, excellent principals who support teachers' work and occupational conditions and students' non-academic outcomes such as well-being cannot be recognised by current, externally imposed accountability metrics. From empirical studies (e.g. Louis et al. 2010) and meta-analyses (e.g. Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe 2008), we know that certain leadership practices have significant associations with teachers' job-related outcomes (e.g. instructional skills) and student academic outcomes, but we do not know much about whether and how principals' work can make a difference in teachers' work and occupational health, and in students' non-academic outcomes such as wellbeing.

Another important finding from Pollock's study I wish to note is the trend for increasing use of ICT by principals. While ICT utilisation seems desirable in particular for faster and more efficient organisational communication, using ICT outside of school and before/after office hours for school work seems to be a sign that principals' work is adopting the characteristics of a 24/7 ubiquitous service, which commonly occurs in business sectors. This somehow resonates with the growing requirement for 24/7 self-management in many professions in late capitalist societies (Crary 2013). In other words, neoliberal discourses in education seem to say that good or successful principals are required to be always in the loop of their work and are asked to go the extra mile for better organisational performance. Indeed, such 24/7 self-management discourses appear a pathological phenomenon to people in leadership positions in public as well as corporate sectors. In short, research on principals' work intensity and burnout should be further investigated.

Finally, Drysdale et al.'s study shows how value-driven leadership practices can empower people to change situations proactively and continuously, whereas Sun et al.'s study suggests that data-driven leadership practices can enhance areas such as professional development and school planning. It seems that much of the school leadership research tends to highlight or prestige one over the other (i.e. value-driven versus data-driven). In general, principals enact leadership that intermingles both value-driven and data-driven practices in real school contexts. Apparently, both are complementary to each other. Future research capturing a fuller picture of both dimensions is awaited.

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